

Berkeley's Criticism of Abstract Ideas: Argument Reconstruction

Reconstructing Arguments

Reconstructing an argument involves six steps:

1. Copy all the assumptions and conclusions. Label
 - (a) Which assertions are assumptions and which are conclusions.
 - (b) Of which premises each conclusion is purportedly a consequence
2. Copy the author's definitions of all technical terms. If the author does not define key terms, copy any passages in which the author explains or gives examples of key terms.
3. Rewrite all definitions, assumptions, and conclusions in your own words.
4. Add plausible premises to render the argument valid. Similarly, explain critical terms that the author seems to have left undefined.
5. Provide textual evidence that supports your hypothesis that the author likely endorsed the premises and definitions you have added.
6. If appropriate, repeat the above five steps if the author provides arguments with conclusions that are identical to the premises of the argument that you have just reconstructed.

Berkeley's Impossibility Argument

In an unpublished manuscript of *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Knowledge*, Berkeley argues:

It is, I think, a receiv'd axiom that an impossibility cannot be conceiv'd. For what created intelligence will pretend to conceive, that which God cannot cause to be? Now it is on all hands agreed, that nothing abstract or general can be made really to exist, whence it should seem to follow, that it cannot have so much as an ideal existence in the understanding.